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SUBJECT: EARLY LOCAL ELECTIONS OFFER NATIONAL PREVIEW

REF: A. 05 ZAGREB 834

[1](#)B. 05 ZAGREB 827

[1](#)C. 05 ZAGREB 792

[1](#)1. SUMMARY AND COMMENT: The GoC has called early local elections for April 9 in two counties, the city of Velika Gorica and the small municipality of Nova Gradiska due to administrative irregularities following the regularly-scheduled polls in May 2005 (reftels). What would normally be a relatively simple campaign has exploded with appearances by top officials from PM Sanader and his top cabinet ministers to the leaders of all major political parties. This exaggerated electoral battle reveals political leaders' awareness that these local races will create the optics for the parliamentary race expected in November 2007 and establish the relative importance and strength of each party in the public eye. The four jurisdictions involved are geographically dispersed, so the results may indeed be representative of the whole country.

[1](#)2. Velika Gorica, on the southeastern outskirts of Zagreb, is especially attractive to the parties, and the race there features several nationally prominent politicians. Rapid growth has made it the sixth largest city in Croatia, and proximity to the capital increases its importance as a city with tremendous economic potential. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

POLITICAL FRENZY TO PROVE PARTY STRENGTH

[1](#)3. The northeastern county of Pozega-Slavonia and the southernmost county of Dubrovnik-Neretva, along with the centrally-located Velika Gorica and the western Slavonian Nova Gradiska will open the polls this Sunday to replace the city councils and county assemblies dissolved in early February. Each suffered a political crisis when individual councilors (mainly from the Croatian Party of Rights - HSP) decided to leave the ranks of ruling majorities and thus threatened to topple the local governments in question. In an attempt to preserve the status quo, those in local power challenged the right of these councilors to break ranks, invoking blanket resignations and excluding them from councils and assemblies. Independent legal experts concluded that these practices were illegal, prompting the GoC to call new elections.

[1](#)4. Top state and party officials are now actively campaigning in support of their respective candidates. Moreover, Finance Minister Ivan Suker is the official slate "bearer" (prime candidate) for the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in Velika Gorica. Other candidates in the city include former foreign minister Tonino Picula (Social Democratic Party - SDP), and recently removed justice minister Vesna Skare-Ozbolt (Democratic Center - DC). On April 7, five presidents of major Croatian parties -- PM

Sanader of the HDZ, Ivica Racan of the SDP, Anto Djapic of the HSP, Josip Friscic of the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) and Djurdja Adlesic of Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLs) -- are all scheduled to campaign in Velika Gorica at the same time. By then, each of them will also have visited the two counties where early elections are being held.

FEW POLLS TO PREDICT RESULTS

15. While major parties are increasingly choosing to enter elections alone and seek coalition partners after the votes are counted in hopes of demonstrating their independent strength, these races feature various coalition combinations.

The HDZ is going it alone in Velika Gorica and Pozega-Slavonia County but is in coalition with one of its national partners, the HSLs, in Dubrovnik-Neretva County. In Velika Gorica, however, the HSLs crossed over to the SDP, which has formed coalitions in all races.

16. Despite the campaign circus, parties and the media have invested little in opinion polling for these particular elections. One exception is a late March poll which found that 47 percent of respondents in Velika Gorica would vote for the SDP/HNS/HSLs coalition, 23 percent would support the HDZ and 15 percent would vote for the DC. This poll, which featured a healthy 37 percent of the electorate as undecided, predicts much closer results in the counties. Despite recent national polls indicating support from more than 10 percent of voters, the far right HSP appears to be hovering around the five percent threshold in all races.

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